

Melinda McBee Orzulak

Reviving Empathy and Imagination: Arts Integration Enlivens Teaching and Learning

Melinda McBee Orzulak describes classroom practices and professional development activities that were influenced by her participation in an arts integration course. Risk-taking, empathy, complexity, and imagination became hallmarks of her instruction.

We speak of facts, yet facts exist only partially to us if they are not repeated and re-created through emotions, thoughts and feelings.

Azar Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books

Scene One: *Body movements match the rhythm of their words as students perform a group poem about the roles of silence and voice in the face of evil.*

Scene Two: *Teachers form half-circles, each holding a slip of paper with a sentence, as they reorder themselves to stage the structure of a coherent paragraph.*

Scene Three: *Students stand arguing within the personas of human rights activist, corporation president, and sweatshop worker as students seated in the audience pose questions about global labor issues.*

Inspired by Steppenwolf Theatre's Teacher Immersion course, these scenes demonstrate how arts integration can improve classroom practice as well as professional development sessions. Titled Teaching Nonfiction through Theatre, the course used the topic of Islam to show how arts integration can be used to teach nonfiction.

The course revitalized my understanding that when teachers can experience teaching techniques as active participants, they can imagine new methods for engaging students as creative participants in the classroom.

Empathy in the Age of Test Preparation

In the world of test preparation and crowded curriculum, infusing empathy may seem like a secondary

goal when it comes to "covering" material. However, the immersion experience reminded me that factual information needs a larger frame of reference. In "Students Remember . . . What They Think About," Daniel T. Willingham explains, "Cognitive science has shown that what ends up in a learner's memory is not simply the material presented—it is the product of what the learner thought about when he or she encountered the material" (37). He further describes how memory is facilitated when students actually *think* about the meaning of the material. As I read Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tebran* during the weeks of the immersion sessions, I pieced together previously learned facts about Iran's history. For the first time, I began to understand the complicated connections between those facts. The narratives linked the information in a cohesive way because I experienced the events through the lives of the characters.

While providing creative entry points to literature is not new to most English teachers, the performing arts can also transform other areas of the English classroom. The immersion course demonstrated that theater exercises can help students access conceptual information, understand dense readings, review vocabulary, and tackle controversial issues.

Setting the Stage for Arts Integration

Physical space and classroom cohesion are two key elements for arts integration. Thinking critically about the physical space provided for students, whether those students are teachers or high school students, helps set the stage for artistic risk-taking. Resident artist Robin Chaplik's first priority with the immersion sessions was to "create an environment of dignity" and communicate her respect for hardworking teachers. This meant having a malleable space for movement that was "fresh, open,

light, and airy; providing something to eat and drink; knowing that people are people." Sodas, water, and healthy snacks always lined the counters. While this may not be possible in the classroom, some of the most memorable activities seem to be coupled with food: Teachers reminisce about the professional development session with shrimp; students

remember the *Odyssey* lesson with baklava. Being an immersion participant reminded me to acknowledge the effects of the physical environment. In my classroom, when the day of an active role-playing session about global issues was intensely hot and humid, I shifted the lesson. Instead of the original movement exercise, I asked my lethargic students to use our lack of air-conditioning to help them imagine the even more extreme circumstances discussed in an article about sweatshop labor.

The immersion program also taught me the necessity of providing cohesion between members of a group, be they teachers or students. While mutual empathy brought together the teachers in the immersion program, we were still teachers talking about our different schools, struggles, and subject areas. The ensemble concept is crucial to Steppenwolf's overall structure and to the idea of "working in agreement" introduced in Viola Spolin's *Theater Games for the Classroom*. Chaplik believes that "the more supported you are in a community, the more free you are to be an individual. Sometimes it's easier for students to take a risk from within a group." Theater games, or ensemble-building activities, can effectively create a group that will help inspire risk-taking.

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To start each immersion session, Chaplik gently called the teacher participants into a circle. Her tone and body language in the circle communicated, "Let's participate in this together; I am modeling as a teacher." Recognizing that teachers are "hungry to talk to each other," Chaplik let us debrief for a couple of minutes by building discussion into the lesson. Theater arts warm-up activities helped the teachers transform into an ensemble, like an ensemble of actors, by completing movement and vocal activities that required them to listen to each other and to work together.

Classroom Application

As I realized how the spatial shift into a circle during the ensemble activities affected my overall attitude and focus, I began to think of classroom applications. I used an ensemble warm-up activity, Pass the Clap (see fig. 1), in a homeroom class where students tended to socialize within cliques rather than work as a cohesive group. I moved the desks into one large circle. Initially, students resisted the new format, but I modeled the activity and acknowledged that they might feel silly at first. As students sat in the circle, Pass the Clap converted a room full of cliques, behavior issues, and negative attitudes into a circle of hands clapping in unison. Students pleaded, "One more time, please," when I asked them to move out of the circle at the end of class.

Professional Development Application

Because the concept of ensemble is vital to teaching communities where people must constantly work together, team-building exercises as simple as Pass the Clap can help establish a healthy school culture.

FIGURE 1. Pass the Clap

In a circle, keeping their feet planted on the floor and turning only at the waist, students pass a clap. The "passing" of the clap involves two students making eye contact with each other and clapping their hands together at the same time. The sound they make should be that of one clap.

Once the students get the hang of it, they can increase their speed. It should seem as if an electrical current is passing around the circle.

After the clap makes its way successfully around the circle two or three times, students can experiment with reversing the direction from time to time. This is a great focusing exercise.

For example, my department participated in Pass the Clap after a divisive professional development session. A five-minute activity took our group from a hotbed of frustration to a circle of laughing participants. Almost every teacher involved told me how the activity provided much-needed levity, and the next round of professional collaboration was positive and productive.

The Boston Arts Academy (BAA) modeled these same principles during my teaching internship. Each meeting began with snacks or lunch and a Sponge activity. BAA's director, Linda Nathan, explains that the idea of the "sponge" (similar to a "do now" activity in the classroom) is to create an initial cleansing activity. The concept comes from team-building activities and can be used as a way to clear teachers' heads, gather information from each other, or get specifics in writing about a topic. Sometimes the prompt was for teachers to talk to other teachers about an issue; at other times, teachers freewrote about their needs. Sometimes the activity simply made the faculty move into new positions, work together, and laugh. A written agenda and written announcements created more time for this kind of activity. The responsibility for lunch, snacks, and drinks (and birthday recognition) rotated between departmental or curricular teams. Eating during the introductory activity provided conviviality, a communication on a more personal and profound level. The message was similar to Chaplik's: enjoy yourself, but use your time productively.

Gaining Empathy by Experiencing the Material

Empathy is also at the heart of good teaching and leadership. Yet, the reality is that some professional development sessions feel more like the air has been drained out of the room instead of helping teachers breathe in new strategies. Empathy means anticipating the needs and knowledge base of the audience, a concept familiar to teachers yet often forgotten when teaching teachers. It is easier to stand in front of a room and hand out a packet at a department meeting or workshop.

Conversely, teachers in the immersion program participated in each activity as if they were the students. Chaplik says, "You have to know what an exercise feels like before you can teach it adequately." The process of empathizing with what

students would feel, think about, and remember during an activity was crucial. The big challenge for teachers is how to be sure that students are "thinking about meaning" (Willingham 39). Willingham posits that learning through physical activity does not guarantee deeper learning; instead, teachers need to "*anticipate what students will be thinking when they are doing the assignment*" (39; italics in original).

As I brought arts integration techniques into my classroom, the experiences of physical, mental, and emotional risk-taking allowed me to anticipate some of the insecurities and questions that students might have during the activity. For example, in one activity, Line by Line (see fig. 2), designed to access the complicated stereotypes about Islam, teachers followed the steps for creating group poems based on our freewrites. After rehearsing several times, we presented the poems to the audience by standing in the order of the lines and using our voices and bodies to reflect the meaning of the lines. As we heard our voices in a mosaic of sound, the depth of thought in the poems stunned us.

We teachers were fully engaged and taking risks, so we *felt* the lesson. After I internalized the lesson, I became more willing to take the same risk with my classes. I realized how the movement between positions or activities changed my perspective, and I became curious about how the same activity might affect students.

Classroom Application

Students used Line by Line to process complicated issues of social evil and personal responsibility as well as structure and rhythm in poetry. Students expressed intricate, paradoxical emotions as a group, and the activity enabled us to talk about the performance aspect of poetry, as groups used movement to express the meaning of their poems. Some groups chose to rework their pieces based on the audience's feedback. One group, after giggling during the initial choreographed movements, awed the audience

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FIGURE 2. Line by Line

A fun way for students to practice writing and revising, Line by Line addresses skills required to work successfully within a group. It is also a wonderful exercise for exploring personal connections and perceptions around content themes.

- > In groups, students share their freewrites with each other. (Note: Let students know that if they have written things too personal to share, they have the option of sharing just a few lines or words.)
 - > Students then work in their groups to create a poem composed of portions of their freewrites. Something from each student's freewrite must be in the poem.
 - > Once they've chosen their text, students stand side by side in a line reciting it and switching places with each other until they are satisfied they've found the best order for the poem.
 - > Students rehearse their poems.
 - > Each group then performs for the class. The class discusses each performance. Allow groups to share their creative processes with the class as well.
 - > To take the revision process a step further, allow students to rework or heighten their pieces based on feedback they got from the rest of the class or their own new ideas.
 - > Another nice idea is to have groups create a colorful poster featuring the text of their poems to hang in the classroom.
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with a second performance that expressed profound thinking about voicelessness and liberation.

Line by Line can be modified and applied to multiple contexts, not just to create poetry. A version of the activity helped me teach the ACT Standards for Transition skills of organizing paragraphs, identifying topic sentences, and deleting irrelevant information. Students identified topic sentences, supporting details, and transitional phrases. Physically reorganizing parts of passages and paragraphs helped students feel the construction of a text in a new way.

Professional Development Application

I recently presented a version of Line by Line at a faculty meeting that was in a room locked into the speaker-versus-audience structure. Instead of giving in to the space, I presented an interactive activity where faculty members had to move around, form groups, and present the material using news briefs from the *Union* to demonstrate the overall lesson structure. As they engaged in the activity, I saw the teachers transformed from sucking down coffee at their seats to participants congratulating each other.

Weaving in the Complexity with Arts Integration

Weaving empathy into a lesson is particularly important when teaching complex topics. In today's global community, we need ways to engage students with controversial issues, and Chaplik

explains, "So many people in America are experiencing confusing feelings about cultures and religions that differ from their own. The arts can help teachers explore potentially volatile topics with their students in a free yet safe environment."

Teaching the truth, says Chaplik, is one of the most difficult tasks of a teacher: "Truth is complicated. When you start talking about teaching in an arts integrated way, students are allowed to make themselves relevant in anything they're studying." I see this process at work with students as more nonfiction sources work their way into the curriculum. My ninth graders recently finished a global-issues unit that involves reading multiple articles and opposing viewpoints on current global issues. Many students gloss over the complexities; I sought to help students understand how many conflicting perspectives feed into global issues, making resolution more difficult.

In response to an article about the global economy and sweatshops, students wrote interior monologues from the perspectives of individuals mentioned in the article. Using facts from the articles to support their positions, students looked at the issues from the perspectives of their personas. After students wrote down their positions, representatives from different groups—human rights activists, factory owners, various types of sweatshop workers, government officials, journalists—advocated for particular responses to the labor policies we put on "trial." Students produced insightful work, but I realized the depth of their ownership of

the content several weeks later during exams. In their final-exam essays, almost all students cited specific, accurate examples from the sweatshop article out of the dozens of texts read during the unit.

The immersion program inspired me to provide opportunities for students to *become the material* and physically interact with concepts found in all types of texts.

Risk-Taking in the Face of Doubt

It is challenging—yet rewarding—to apply the arts integration principles to the classroom and the larger school environment. While the immersion program taught me that experiential professional development is ideal for teachers, we must also learn to take risks by reading about and trying out new activities. This means walking through the potentially uncomfortable steps students will experience and allowing ourselves the room to implement (and revise) new types of lessons. Inspired by the theme of empathy, I finally used a lesson from an *English Journal* article about ecphrastic poetry that has been in my poetry binder for five years (Gorrell). Before teaching the lesson, I walked through the steps the students would experience. I realized how important it was to prepare students for the depth of emotion invoked by the lesson and to allow for silence as students processed their emotions. The risk of teaching this new lesson produced beautiful results. While I will continue to revise my delivery of the lesson, students enjoyed the lesson so much that I regret keeping it in my binder for so long.

My experiences with the immersion program taught me that using the arts ensemble and other kinds of community-building exercises to provide connection is applicable to all teachers, whether

they are self-proclaimed artists or not. While many teachers may not feel like artists, Chaplik describes the similarities between teachers and a group of actors: “We are talking about two professions where people are on stage all the time and asked to adopt particular roles.” The immersion program taught me to let go of my disclaimers (“I am not an actor. I am not an extrovert.”) and explore what seem to be inaccessible artistic techniques as simply innovative ways to teach.

There is also a correlation between directors and teachers, according to Chaplik: “A teacher works toward intellectual growth with her or his students just as a stage director works toward a common understanding with her or his actors.” A little bit of creativity and imagination can revive our passion for learning and teaching as both actors and directors on the stage of learning.

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